1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

BIRTH, INFANCY AND EARLY TRAINING

844 843 or from a visit, to give birth without undue pain. However, immediately the birth-pangs are felt, close female relatives are called upon, and soon the house teems with other women coming to offer their help. It should be mentioned here that while during pregnancy the husband's relatives [843] are expected to show more interest than the wife's, the actual event of birth is one of the obligations of the matrilineal side. It is natural that in the case of the first-born child the event of birth is attended to by the [591] mother and her relatives, as the woman is still in her matrilocal residence. If she has left it for any reason, she usually moves back to her mother's home to be attended to there, or the mother would be immediately called upon if her daughter is in her husband's house.

Thirty years ago the village had no official midwife (dayah), but since then a certificated woman has been responsible for deliveries. It is the members of the same family, however, who have been performing the functions of midwifery. The profession of a midwife is not a coveted one, as the midwife must be a woman 'who cannot be shamed'.[1] Like very old women, the midwife is a 'mukabila' who can meet men face to face, talk [834] to any man and walk in the streets without hiding her face. This might be also explained by the fact that the midwife is a woman engaged in an 'unclean' task, for a woman who is giving birth is considered to be 'unclean'. Yet in some cases the midwife is not called upon for birth, especially if a qualified woman exists in the family.

For delivery, the pregnant woman is seated on three stones, a proverbial position for anxiety and pain as expressed in the common saying 'Like a woman sitting on the stones'. The mother usually supports the back, while two other women each hold a leg and another two hold the outstretched arms. The usual birth-pangs are accompanied by requests of help from saints, especially 'Assayid al Badawi' who is the recognized saint to be called upon to 'widen the straits'. The after-birth is thrown out at night 'to be eaten by the dogs', the purpose fathering a wish that the woman would bear as many children as the bitch bears puppies—(dogs [825] being known for their proliferousness).[2]

The child's first cry is interpreted as his reaction to his coming from 'the wide to the narrow'.[3] He is immediately swaddled in old washed clothes belonging to the father or mother. The mother's jewellery, which had been taken off before delivery, is now put beside the child, as a gesture that the mother is no longer a mere bride (in the case of the first child), but [851] a mother whose child is more valuable to her than her jewels. In the case of a boy, other objects are put alongside, such as scissors and a sheathed

[1] It is perhaps because of her duty, the sex taboo is not enjoined upon her.

[2] For the belief in the importance of the placenta as a survival of the ancient Egyptian belief, see Seligman, 'Ancient Egyptian Beliefs in Modern Egypt', in *Essays and Studies presented to William Ridgeway*, Cambridge University Press, 1913, pp. 451–2.

[3] The women villagers' explanation seems to be in line with what some psychoanalysts call the 'birth-trauma'.

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

due to the fact that there is no formal ceremony for the naming in Artas, as in Silwa, and hence the change is easier. 553

Since the enforcement of registration of births about forty years ago, the child is registered after the ceremony. It is to be remembered that still-births are not registered, and are never buried in the cemetery, but always below the threshold of the house. 656 845

The mother takes no active part in all the ceremony activities, as she is not allowed to move from her room of confinement until forty days have elapsed. As mentioned earlier, the child is considered to be guarded throughout this period by the angels, who talk to him, entertain him, and sometimes tease or even annoy him. This is the explanation of the baby's occasional smiles, as well as cries. He smiles because the angels have told him that his father is alive, and cries when they inform him that his father has died. 846 [876] [877]

By the end of the forty days, the mother finishes her period of confinement and is considered to be in full control of the baby. She can move about with him and resume her ordinary domestic tasks as she becomes ceremonially clean after having her first bath, a kind of ritual cleansing. [783]

The end of this confinement means the gradual introduction of the child to the wider family circles by taking it on visits to relatives or them visiting the house with presents. If the mother takes the child to any house, the child is never expected to leave empty-handed. Whether near or distant relatives, or of no blood connection at all, they always give the child presents varying from salt, dates, a loaf of bread, an egg, to money and more valuable things. On the birth of the first child the paternal grandfather cannot see his grandson without sending a ram or a goat before his arrival. 846 851 431

Another step is the introduction of the newly-born boy to the other boys in the neighbourhood. For this purpose the mother prepares a dish of boiled maize or wheat and sugar, called 'balila', and taking her child, accompanied by the children of the neighbourhood, repairs to some elevated land to eat the food. For this occasion the mother dresses in new scented clothes. For the first time also, the child wears new clothes, consisting of a white undergarment covered by a striped one, thus discarding his mother's or father's old wrappings. 851 846 858

It is socially encouraged that both a woman and a man should give rein to their intense desire for children. The main function of marriage is to have children and thus perpetuate family life. This shows itself in one of the condolatory phrases addressed to any offspring on the occasion of their father's death: 'He who has left successors is not dead.' My informant, Ali, said, 'A childless couple will have no "successors" to read the "Fatiha" for their souls after their death and their name will thus end by their departure from this world. Children are really useful, not only in this world but in the world hereafter. The Prophet (on whom be the peace and blessings of God) said, "Get married and multiply, as I shall take 847 [183] [581]

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

seven sons or more are always held up as a model and an enviable ideal, and one of the most favourable prayers to any man is to wish him 'seven sons and to perform seven pilgrimages'.

The greater status deriving from having boys shows itself in the difference of presents given to the midwife on the birth of a boy compared with those on the birth of a girl. The announcer of the birth of a boy to the father would ask him for a present, and would warmly congratulate him, wishing him to have a brother for example for the boy if he is the first one, or to complete the seven. In the case of a girl, the father is usually teased by telling him: 'May she never sneeze.' The saying is that 'a boy is a joy even if he is stillborn'. Another saying runs, 'A boy who dies is better than seven girls'. It is also interesting to notice that fathers and mothers swear 'by the neck' of their boys, and not girls (by their lives), as one of the most effective and binding oaths. Girls jeer at their playmates who have no brothers, and swear by the life of their own brothers.

The fear of having a daughter is mainly connected with the sense of 'shame' which a girl might bring to her family, especially before her marriage. It is the responsibility of the male line of her family to arrange her marriage, and clothe and feed her if she is not married. If any disgraceful rumour about a girl or a woman spreads in the village it is the father as well as the husband who has to discipline the girl or bear the social stigma. Girls at a very early stage, on seeing a moth hovering round the fire, are taught to repeat 'Fire is preferable to shame'. It is also said that a girl is brought up only to be taken away by a man (when she is married) and this means a loss to the family.

Yet the value of the girls is often justified and rationalized by other arguments. On being told of the birth of a girl, a father would say, 'She is God's creation; and who knows where the blessedness lies?' A girl is always referred to in this context of the evaluation of the two sexes as 'the one who will usher her parents into the shade' (i.e. coolness) when they get old, as the girl is considered more compassionate than the boy. My informant, Mahmoud, told me that 'visiting one's daughter is usually an occasion for having either a pot of tea or some food; she can never let her father leave her husband's house without "wetting his throat".' Mothers are very keen on having daughters to help them in domestic work, by sending them on errands to neighbours' homes.

One of the folk songs refers to the daughter as 'appointing her father as the sole arbiter in a gathering'—which is her engagement gathering when the father fixes the bride-price 'which is the daughter's weight of gold and silver'. The song goes on to say that through the daughter 'the father stretches his roots to feed other places' and thus the girl provides a means of extending kinship relations through her marriage. What the song does not explicitly say is that a girl is no financial strain on her parents as they do not provide any marriage payment for her, and hence her marriage is not a burden on the family as with the boy.

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

be more attached to his home if his head has first 'fallen into it' at birth (masqat ar-ras).

There is no policy of any kind for limiting birth, either by spacing it out or by practising birth control. Birth control in the modern sense is unheard of, and in any case it is considered as a religious sin, and deemed an interference with God's creation.[1] A part of the married male ethos is not to regulate his sex desires, but to give them full play whenever the need arises. Continence is not a desirable thing for a married man, but to have sexual intercourse with his wife is a good religious deed (hasana). One should not counteract sexual desires but rather stimulate them, and hence the various devices such as special food and aphrodisiacs like hasheesh and opium are resorted to for sexual potency. The writer heard of no woman who has practised any devices to confer sterility on her.

The period of the 'forty days' is enshrouded in a great deal of secrecy and psychological delicacy. For fear of the evil eye, the influence of the evil spirits, or sterility, the mother should adhere to the rigid system of food, minimum movement and general seclusion and other taboos. This is the period in which another woman who wants to become pregnant might suddenly 'press' on her, and thus she could be hampered or delayed in her next pregnancy. However, when a visitor comes to the house the mother covers herself as well as the child and pretends to be feeling rather uncomfortable, either groaning or suffering from pain. In referring to the baby, visitors must be careful not to praise it openly, unless they use the safeguarding phrases such as 'God preserve him' (or her), 'may the Prophet's blessings be upon him'. On enquiring about the sex of a child, if it is a boy, his sex is usually hidden at first to be declared afterwards.

Concerning the child itself, one observes that it is announced and introduced in various ways. In the case of a boy, a 'gong' is produced in his room every morning and every evening; the purpose, as it is believed, is to make the child brave and not to fear any unexpected shock. Yet the reaction of the neighbours on hearing the sound is one of recognition that 'the so-and-so's are sounding for their child'.

The naming ceremony in the case of a boy is the second link in the chain of introducing the child to his neighbours and relatives. Actually the name is usually agreed upon before birth, though the ceremony is the formal occasion for declaring the name. Women have no formal congregation like the men, but a small portion of food and meat is sent to the homes of the female relatives. It is to be stressed that very few people have a naming ceremony for the girls, which is also a male gathering. The motive behind the girls' ceremony could be regarded as a kind of religious puritanism to counteract the pre-Islamic sin of burying the girls alive.

[1] A scholar of al-Azhar told the writer that the Grand Mufti of Egypt recently issued a 'fatwa' permitting the use of contraceptives and sanctioning abortion before the fourth month, that is 'before the child is gifted with a soul'.

1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

553 851 This celebration could also take place in the case of a married couple who have had no children for a considerable length of time, and suddenly have a girl, whom they would like to value as a boy. A man who had no children from his first wife could also celebrate the 'sobou' of his first child—a daughter, from his second wife. The 'sobou' ceremony for the succeeding boys is usually held by the comparatively well-to-do people, and one cannot fail to note the social significance of the celebrations. It is a display of one's economic ability to be able to afford killing a ram and [554] offering wheat bread and vegetables. Thus the continuing of 'sobou' ceremony for all the boys adds to one's social prestige.

851 The third stage of his introduction is the 'balila food' with other children after the end of the forty days. Though nothing outstanding happens during the meal, the implication is that the child, finishing his 'angelic period', would mix with these children later.

The fourth stage is the formal and informal visits of the mother and child to other people or the latter coming to her house with presents.

846 It has been mentioned that during the first forty days the child remains in the closest contact with its mother practically throughout the whole of its waking as well as sleeping hours as she lies beside it on the mat. During most of this period the mother nurses the child while she is facing [853] it. This close bodily proximity establishes the first educational relationship for the child. Yet this is not the sole relationship, even at this period, for 850 the importance of other people for the child's education is symbolized by the act of 'teaching' (talkeen). For this purpose 'a good man' or 'a good woman' is chosen to perform this act with the boy or the girl respectively. The chosen person eats from a sweet thing, either a date or a piece of sugar, which would then be given to the child to suck, and this is followed by prayers for the child. Through the 'talkeen' the character of the 'good man or woman' is supposed to be transmitted to the baby. When the child grows older reference to the person who 'taught' him usually crops up in assessing his character and temperament.

846 The disposal of the child's navel cord during the first forty days is of special social significance. After cutting the boy's navel cord, the father takes it to the field, there to eat some previously prepared food. After the meal, the father buries the cord in one of the divisions of the field. The income of this section is appropriated, at least theoretically, to the boy, and his 'luck' is gauged according to the yield of that area. Sometimes the boy's cord is buried below the threshold of the Kuttab (the village Koran School) as father to the wish that he would go to the Kuttab to 'memorize the Koran'. In the case of a girl, the navel cord is buried below the threshold of the house or kept in a small box. It is quite obvious that the difference in the disposal of the navel cord reflects the distinction between the prospective spheres of work for the two sexes.

854 In discussing the early training of the child during the first three years, the first important feature that looms large is the close physical proximity

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

fit for prayers. It is not uncommon, whether amongst children or adults, to describe a person as disgraceful by saying that he has still got the foreskin. The relation between circumcision and ceremonial purity is also confirmed by the fact that those boys whose prepuce is absent are considered to be purified by the angels. The circumcised boy's dress, that of a religious man in open white shift and a green outer garment, could be also taken as evidence for the purificatory significance of the ritual.

It must be pointed out here that the circumcision of girls has never had the universality of that of the boys; the religious authority behind it is very weak and could be rejected, and even its practice is not universal throughout the Moslem world at present. On the other hand, some of the prophetic traditions, as mentioned earlier, do not specify its desirability for the female, and the absence of such a definite religious backing for it should render its abandonment comparatively easy. It is argued that circumcision of girls, by removing the clitoris, which is regarded as the centre of excitement, is deemed necessary for ensuring pre-marital chastity.[1] Such a statement was mentioned to the writer by the midwife in Silwa before he became aware of it in anthropological literature. The need for the control of any sexual excitability is understandable in a religiously puritanic community which considers any form of emotional stimulus, either through glance or touch, from any member of the opposite sex, other than the husband or wife, as sinful.

The circumcision ceremony could be considered as a public declaration of the child's sex, with the father as socially responsible for the ceremony in the case of his son, while the mother and her female relatives solely attend to it in the case of the daughter. In other words it provides a social emphasis on the child's alignment with its sex group. The distinction between male and female circumcision is reflected in Classical Arabic by the use of two different words—'khatan' for the boy, and 'khafd' for the girl. In the colloquial language of the village, circumcision of the boy is sometimes referred to as 'cutting his pigeon' while in the case of a girl it is described as 'cutting her cockscomb'. The operation is not suddenly performed on the child, but the mother, especially in the case of her son, may attempt to prepare him gradually for the event by caressing his organ and playfully endeavouring to separate the foreskin from the glans. While doing this, she would hum words to the effect that what she is doing will help to make him to become a man amongst men. In a community with rigid sex dichotomy, it is not surprising to find that it is a great fright, or a source of great resentment, for a small boy to be threatened by his mother that she will circumcise him, and for the girl to be threatened to be circumcised by the father. Such a threat by a parent of the opposite sex to the child is considered by the parents as one of the most dire threats that can be uttered, and it is thus used to help the child in identifying himself with the parent of his own sex.

[1] *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Article on 'Circumcision', p. 666.

1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND EVENTS OF CHILDHOOD

The alignment of the child with its sex could be also inferred from the fact that during the ceremony the boy wears a girl's headcloth, symbolizing his last chance of indulging in any activity which is not deemed fit for males.[1] This influence has been brought to the writer's mind by the barber's comment; while wrapping the headcloth round the boy's neck, he says: 'Let us put this female cloth around you, and by making you look like a girl tonight, you will be able to avert the evil eye.' This is also obvious in the expected behaviour of the boys not to cry or show any signs of pain during the operation, in order to whiten the father's face, while the girls in contrast are expected and allowed to cry. That the difference in the expectation is due to the fact that the girl's operation is more painful than that of the boy, and hence justifiable, is one way of looking at it, but it is undoubtedly a reflection of the expected ethos of the two sexes.[2] Endurance of pain is a heroic action of the male, while crying and weeping is only expected from women. The difference of 'ethos' between the two sexes reflects itself also in their public attitudes towards a person's death. While the men solemnly gather in the guest house for the obsequies, and public demonstration of weeping is only expected from them on their return journey to the guest house after the burial, the women express their grief in almost hysterical weeping, wailing and dirging.

During the circumcision ceremony the boy's aggression is however allowed to express itself during the procession that follows the operation, as while he is carried on his way to the mosque and the Nile, he is allowed to break an egg by throwing it at any person in the procession. On the other hand, the girl is given free scope in crying, screaming and asking for help.

One cannot fail to see the connection between circumcision and marriage, the former being a preparation for the latter, and the similarities between the public celebration of the two events are striking, as will be shown later in discussing the marriage ceremony. A circumcised boy or girl is normally referred to as 'bridegroom' or 'bride' in anticipation of their future role in life. The connection between circumcision and marriage is also obvious from beliefs and rituals common to both events; the circumcised boy as well as the bridegroom must visit the mosque or gaze on the Nile. The belief is that on his or her circumcision or wedding, a person could be deprived of fertility and potency, and hence great care must be taken to avoid the evil eye, and to avoid those who are sterile and desire fertility, who may well seize the opportunity to use or cross over the circumcised or married man's instruments and clothes. The connection between circumcision and fertility could be also inferred from the

[1] Edward Lane mentions that during his time boys used to be dressed in girls' garments in the circumcision ceremony. *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, p. 59.

[2] The word 'ethos' here is used in the sense in which Bateson has defined it as 'the culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and the emotions of individuals'. Naven, p. 220.